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Date: Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2011

**PRESS RELEASE FROM RESPUBLICA**

**RELEASE TIME: Immediate**

## **Older people “undervalued” in the Big Society, says new report from Phillip Blond’s think tank**

The contribution of older people to David Cameron’s Big Society policy is overlooked and undervalued by Government, says a new report from Phillip Blond’s think tank ResPublica.

The report, sponsored by older people’s charity Independent Age, urges the Coalition to rethink the policies designed to support the Big Society, ensuring that they support and encourage older people who already contribute an estimated £14 billion worth of volunteering and childcare to the UK economy every year.

It sets out a raft of policies aimed at breaking down barriers that hamper greater community participation from older people. And it calls on organisations to end the discrimination faced by older people, who are often written off when they hit certain arbitrary age points.

The report, *Age of Opportunity – Older people, volunteering and the Big Society*, written by Antonia Cox, a policy expert at ResPublica, is being launched as part of the drive by the think tank to boost David Cameron’s flagship policy.

It defends the concept of the Big Society in its 51-pages, believing the policy has focused attention on the importance of individual and community action in society, but it says that the Government must recognise the valuable contribution of older people - and encourage them to do even more.

“Older people already make a positive and wholly disproportionate contribution to our society by volunteering, charitable giving and helping to maintain the values and principles underpinning our civic society. In the future they can do more to significantly boost participation and volunteering, providing the time and experience to transform our civic culture.”

The report also says that the Government has a once in a lifetime opportunity to get the policy right and reach out to the baby boomer generation saying, "This group is healthier and wealthier than previous generations and, compared to the generations following them, fewer will need to work into their late sixties or early seventies."

And it highlights four schemes that draw on social capital to provide care services in Japan and in the UK, car rides in the US for older people and adult education in Europe, which it believes provide examples of "best practice" and logical extensions of traditional volunteering models.

"The Big Society can be used to help older people, and they themselves can do much to help build it...This understanding should be reflected in Government action. Government is not society however it can help it flourish."

The report acknowledges concerns that cuts are endangering the Big Society but believes that the Government can do more than simply provide cash.

"The elderly face numerous barriers against getting involved and building David Cameron's Big Society," commented Phillip Blond: "Barriers such as arbitrary cut off points, based on age that bare no relation to an individual's ability, health and safety, red tape and negative perceptions of older people, and the incorrect view that they are a drain on society."

"Older people, their experience, sense of community and civic engagement are the solution to many of the challenges facing the UK, not the problem."

Simon Bottery, Independent Age Director of Policy said: "Even at a time of austerity, the Government can play a vital role in encouraging older people to be even more involved, cutting back barriers to involvement and using its authority to 'underwrite' volunteering activities over a long period. Austerity doesn't mean an end to Government's role in creating the Big Society but it may mean it has to change."

The report also highlights the health benefits of volunteering and the Big Society, "Just like paid work, volunteering is a productive activity that leads to a higher maintenance of health – particularly amongst older adults. There is clear evidence from scientific studies that volunteering benefits health. Those who volunteer are of better health than those who do not."

According to one study, volunteering can help in combating depression, a condition affecting over a fifth of men and 28% of women over 65.

Report author Antonia Cox, added: "Older people tend to volunteer more, vote more, give to charities and get more involved in the community than most other age groups. Many told us they enjoy volunteering and getting involved in good causes, and that it was good for them as well as those they helped. The medical science shows it is definitely beneficial to get out and about and keep your skills and contacts

going after retirement if you can. To most people that is common sense. But lack of information and worries about legal liabilities can get in the way. That's got to be tackled if we are going to adapt successfully to the fact that we are all living longer.”

The report concludes by arguing that the elderly are the bedrock of civil society in the UK and key to unlocking its full potential.

Key recommendations from the report include:

1. The Giving Summit, to be held in autumn 2011, should include a special session on volunteering and civic engagement by older people.
2. The summit should provide an opportunity for charities to share best practice in recruiting, retaining and developing older volunteers.
3. The Government must speed up the delivery of training ex-civil servants as voluntary volunteer managers to support charities.
4. The Government should encourage other employers to re-train ex-employees and retirees to become voluntary volunteer managers.
5. Answering the outstanding questions of the Hodgson Report about regulation and volunteers' exposure to legal liability.
6. Launch a joint charity “myth busting” publicity campaign to educate potential volunteers and charity trustees about their rights and responsibilities, making volunteering simpler and less bureaucratic.
7. Charities should stop applying upper age restrictions to volunteers, assessing an individual's ability.
8. Charities whose mailing and membership lists include large numbers of older people, and which do not use these people as volunteers themselves, should be encouraged to attach to their mailings regular reminders of information gateways on volunteering, such as that of Volunteering England.
9. Pension providers should include links to a portal with information about volunteering opportunities and other civic engagement.
10. Government departments should include information in their communications about volunteering and community schemes.
11. Employers should provide information about volunteering and civic engagement opportunities to older people being made redundant, or retiring early. This could be promoted by the Every Business Commits Forum.
12. Businesses should ensure that employer supported volunteering is promoted to older as well as younger employees.
13. Changes in National Insurance rules for grandparents providing childcare (and the 2010 changes for carers) should be evaluated by government to see whether they could be adapted to incentivise volunteering.
14. Councils should consider supporting a UK equivalent for the USA's Independent Transportation Network.

15. Introduce a care credit scheme similar to the Japanese model.
16. Councils and national government should consider how best they can act as 'underwriters' for schemes that involve long-term banking of credits.
17. Change the voluntary sector's contracting and service agreements with local government to include performance indicators for involving volunteers.
18. Philanthropy UK, should promote volunteering and other civic engagement opportunities.
19. Private banks should also be encouraged to develop high quality philanthropy advice.

For media inquiries, please contact Alistair Thompson of Media Intelligence Partners Ltd on 07970 162225 or 0203 008 8145 or Nick Wood on 07889 617003 or 0203 008 8146.

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#### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

**Phillip Blond** is a political thinker, writer and journalist. He was senior lecturer in theology and philosophy at the University of Cumbria until he left to take up a career in politics and public policy. He founded and now directs the think-tank ResPublica. He writes for the *Guardian*, *The Times*, *Financial Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Independent* and the *Sunday Times* and appears regularly on the BBC.

**ResPublica** is an independent, non-partisan public policy think-tank established in 2009 by Phillip Blond.

ResPublica aims to bring about a revolution in centre-right thinking and produce a policy agenda aimed at addressing the triple crisis of economic, social and cultural collapse.

ResPublica believes that through a revived civic communitarianism, the fostering of a culture of innovation in public services, and the creation of a new economic infrastructure, local communities will assume their proper role as the drivers of social transformation, the owners of new assets and the instigators of economic growth.



**Independent Age** is a unique and growing charity; a support community for thousands of older people across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. We offer a helping hand from a trusted friend, tackling older people's poverty and loneliness by offering information, advice and friendship. For more information visit:

[www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org) Independent Age is merging with another older people's charity, Counsel and Care, to provide a broader ranges of services than either could provide individually.